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ABSTRACT

Logical strategies used in informative writing include factuality, comprehensiveness, and surprise value, which provides the focus of the paper and guides both the organization and the thoroughness with which each subtopic must be covered. Failure to teach surprise value is the main problem behind the uninteresting reports that teachers must face each semester. Surprise value can be defined in terms of predictability; that is, a new fact that is not predictable is more interesting than one that can be predicted. Information can be surprising if it is (1) happening locally, (2) happening now, (3) happening to people the reader knows, (4) related to the reader's needs and interests, and (5) unusual. Surprise value also helps students decide what to put in the introduction and conclusion. Thus, the principle of surprise value is a guide to all stages of the writing process for informative discourse. (HOD)

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# TEACHING INFORMATIVE WRITING

# CAN BE INTERESTING

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TEACHING INFORMATIVE WRITING CAN BE INTERESTING

If the inclusion of informative writing on the Regents Competency Test (RCT) is any guide, then the ability to write informative reports must be regarded as an important skill for students to learn. Yet it does not seem that writing teachers or textbooks on writing value it very highly. There is very little discussion of informative writing in the professional literature; and textbooks, if they mention it at all, generally discuss it only in connection with term paper writing. And even then, the emphasis is on the mechanics of term papers and not on the basic nature of informative writing.

It's impossible to say why informative writing is so undervalued. Perhaps many teachers believe that an essay without a thesis statement is somehow not respectable, or perhaps they believe that report writing is such a low-level skill that it need not be taught. In any case, it seems clear that many English teachers do not find it interesting or challenging enough to be worth including in the curriculum. This is a most unfortunate attitude, for I would estimate that students need to write reports at least as often as they need to write papers with thesis statements. And if I am to believe the evidence that crosses my desk, the ability to write good reports is not one that everyone automatically acquires as a result of spending a certain number of years in school. It is not that these reports are "incompetent," if by competency we refer only to a minimal level of mechanical correctness and organization. The basic problem is that they are dull and that the information that I need to gain from them is "buried" within a mass of facts that I do not need.

Our job, then, is to teach students how to make reports truly informative to their readers--in short, to make them interesting. And what I wish to

show today is that this process of making reports interesting also makes the job of teaching informative writing interesting for the teacher and the job of writing the reports interesting for the students.

Perhaps it would be best if I started with a little background on informative for those who have not studied it as a formal subject. When I use the term "informative writing," I use it according to the system postulated by James Kinneavy in his book, A Theory of Discourse (Prentice-Hall, 1971). I saw Kinneavy's name on the list of advisory board members for the RCT and this, together with the nature of the test itself and the directions for scoring it, leads me to believe that the makers of the test had Kinneavy's theory in mind. I further assume that most of you who are here today came because you hope to learn something that will help your students pass the RCT. Well, you're in luck, for what I have to say today comes straight out of Kinneavy's theory.

Informative writing is one of what Kinneavy calls the "aims of discourse." The full list of aims is as follows:

THE AIMS OF DISCOURSE

1. Literary discourse
2. Persuasive discourse
3. Expressive discourse
4. Referential (or expository) discourse
   - A. Informative discourse
   - B. Scientific discourse
   - C. Exploratory discourse

As you can see, informative discourse is listed as one of the three types of "referential discourse," more commonly referred to as "exposition." This would indicate that it is supposed to be highly factual in content and relatively impersonal in tone. Furthermore, because we are dealing here with an aim of discourse, we are necessarily concerned more with how to accomplish the aim and less with what may be termed the "lower levels" of the field of English. In other words, we are less concerned about such matters as whether and how to use narration, how to use the media, or how to spell the words. These matters are all important, of course, but only as they relate to carrying out the aim. The list of "lower-level" skills can be seen below in a scheme adapted from Kinneavy's description of the field of English.

THE FIELD OF ENGLISH

1. Aims of discourse
    2. Modes of discourse (narration, description, classification, evaluation)
        3. Media (mass media, large group, small group, one-to-one)
            4. Language arts (writing, reading, speaking, listening)
                5. Semantics (meaning, reference)
                    6. Grammar (syntax, morphemics, phonemics, spelling)

Since we are here concerned with accomplishing the informative aim, the main subjects to be covered in class will be those three characteristics that identify an aim: (1) the logical strategies employed in the text; (2) the typical ways in which texts are organized; and (3) the proper style to use. Furthermore, since even the matters

of organization and style often are affected by the logical strategies, it is with the logical strategies that we must start and with which we will spend most of our time. That is, we want to give students a view of what they are ultimately trying to accomplish before we get into how to do it.

In the case of informative writing, the logical strategies as postulated by Kinneavy are three: factuality, comprehensiveness, and surprise value. These may be roughly defined as follows:

Factuality: The text is to be almost entirely factual, with little intrusion of the author's own opinion. In some kinds of informative writing, the author may speculate about facts that are unknown, but in other types even this is forbidden.

Comprehensiveness: Once a topic is chosen for the paper, all of the facts on that topic must be given. If an aspect of the topic is not covered, we say that the text is slanted or biased.

Surprise Value: Requires that greatest emphasis must be placed on facts that are new to the reader, and, therefore, surprising to him.

While factuality and comprehensiveness are important topics to teach and require substantial amounts of the teacher's time, it is the third logical strategy, surprise value, that I am primarily discussing today. Surprise value is at least as important as factuality and comprehensiveness because if I am only told what I already know, I have not been informed; that is, the paper, however factual and comprehensive it may be, is not really informative discourse and was not worth doing.

Thus, if I must read it, perhaps because I'm the teacher and I have to grade it, the reading will be a real chore for me--as it was probably also an uninspiring chore for the student to write. Failure to teach surprise value, then, is the main culprit behind those stacks of boring, joyless reports which every teacher (and not only the English teachers) must face each semester. By contrast, successfully teaching surprise value is the vital factor in making informative writing interesting to both teacher and student and is even more important if the student's informative papers outside of school are to be read by anyone. If we don't teach students to write for real readers and not just for class exercises, then the main purpose of teaching writing--any kind of writing--has been lost.

Let us then take a closer look at this important concept called surprise value. I explained it briefly above by saying that it involves presenting facts that are "new to the reader." But this is an oversimple definition, for not everything new is also interesting. A better definition is given by Kinneavy, who defines surprise value in terms of predictability; that is, a new fact which is not predictable is more interesting than one which can be predicted. For example, if I awaken in a shaded room at nine o'clock in the morning and you tell me, "It's daylight outside, that's news to me but hardly surprising. I would have predicted daylight at 9 a.m. But if you tell me, "It's snowing outside," that's less predictable and thus has more surprise value.

For students, however, the notion of predictability is sometimes hard to grasp, so it's better to give additional guidelines to surprise value. I use some from journalism, saying that information is more sur-

prising if it meets one or more of the following criteria:

1. It's happening here.
2. It's happening now.
3. It's happening to people the reader knows.
4. It's related to the reader's needs and interests.
5. It's unusual.

The teaching can then proceed mainly by the use of examples. That is, students must learn to identify the surprise value of a topic by working with real topics. Some topics can be provided and discussed in class while in other cases the students must choose their own topics and explore for unpredictable information, perhaps with the help of the teacher.

The basic procedure is best introduced and illustrated in class. Last semester I used the topic, "The Gypsy Moth"; this is a good topic because it has surprise value but that is not immediately evident to students. In fact, students tend to groan in disgust at what seems to be such an obviously boring topic.

To find the surprise value of a topic, the first step is simply to list the subtopics that are included within the main topic. Ordinarily, these can be found even in an encyclopedia entry, but sometimes further reading is necessary before all of the subtopics are identified. For the gypsy moth, the various subtopics are listed below:

MAIN TOPIC: The Gypsy Moth

SUBTOPICS:
1. What it looks like
2. Classification--genus, species, etc.
3. Life cycle
4. Where it comes from

SUBTOPICS: (Cont'd.)
5. How introduced to United States
6. Natural enemies
7. How it spreads
8. Damage it causes
9. Controversy over use of pesticides to control it
10. Local problems with the moths
11. History of attempts to control it
12. What it eats
13. Methods of control
14. Areas of the U.S. now infested
15. Use of synthetic sex lure
16. Problems of defoliation
17. Natural population controls

From this basic list, the main importance of the gypsy moth quickly emerges: it is an extremely destructive pest and difficult to control. That alone makes the gypsy moth worth writing about, but we would not yet say that the topic has much surprise value. After all, there are many destructive insects throughout the world, and the fact that the gypsy moth is one of them does not automatically qualify it as a "hot topic." But then further exploration of the topic reveals that gypsy moths are about to arrive in Western New York, where our school is located, and that local residents are about to be faced with some important and controversial problems in deciding how to deal with it. Thus we have now discovered the true surprise value of the topic: it's happening here, it's happening now, it's happening to us.

Of course, not every topic has such a large amount of surprise value inherent in it. But the important principle is that students should be taught to look for surprise value and to judge surprise value in relation to their intended readers. A paper that is somehow connected to the readers is far more interesting to them than one which is not. For instance, one of my students had chosen to write about Baffin Island, a large Canadian island on the Arctic Circle, and was looking for some way to make the topic interesting to local readers. The problem was that

most aspects of the island are fairly predictable once one knows where the island is located; that is, the weather, the terrain, the people, the flora and fauna are about what one would expect to find so far north. There was only one aspect, the presence of a national park on the island, that seemed to have promising surprise value. The student reasoned that she could rely upon the "unusualness" of finding a park so far north and on the interest many Americans have in visiting parks. That would have been OK with me, but then the student stumbled across the fact that one of the glaciers on the island is the last remnant of the glacier which once covered our part of New York, forming the Attica hills and the Finger Lakes. As a result of this discovery, the focus of the paper changed, with the national park being discussed primarily as a means of access to the glacier. Thus, even in such an unpromising topic as Baffin Island surprise value to meet the criteria for local interest did exist.

Even when there is no local tie-in with the main part of a subject--often the case with term paper topics--searching for some sort of relevance to the intended audience is still the best means of deciding which sub-topic to emphasize. One of my students had decided to write about the African walking catfish and had initially believed that the topic could not be made really important to any potential reader, especially a local one. Yet he wanted to stay with this topic anyhow and was going to rely upon the pure unpredictability of a catfish being able to "walk" as the main emphasis of his paper. But then the student discovered what a nuisance the African walking catfish has made of itself in Florida, where it was introduced accidentally. He decided to make this aspect the main part of his paper because he could tie it into some more noto-

rious examples of introduced species such as the gypsy moth and the Mediterranean fruit fly and thus have a better chance of hooking the reader's interest.

Another way of saying that surprise value is important is to remind ourselves that what we English teachers want most of all from a paper is a "focused" paper. That is, we don't just want a paper which rambles all over the topic with no effort to separate important from unimportant information. We prefer that the reason for writing be clear so that the reason why someone would read the paper is also clear. For informative writing, focus comes about through surprise value. To see why this is so, consider what many students would do with the topic of the gypsy moth. Some students would simply write about each subtopic in random order, with no more than minimal attempts to "group" similar information. Such an approach is not likely to result in a good paper, except by accident. More savvy students, probably the majority, would try to work out some sort of logical organizational pattern, using chronological order, spatial order, or one of the other commonly-taught patterns. For the gypsy moth, the chosen order would probably be chronological, perhaps tracing the life cycle of the moth from the egg through the caterpillar stage to pupa to adult and back to the egg again. The various important facts about the moth would then be "dropped into" the outline at appropriate places, and the resulting full outline might look as follows:

THE GYPSY MOTH

I. Egg stage
   A. What egg masses look like
   B. Counting egg masses to estimate infestation
   C. Transportation of eggs
   D. How to destroy egg masses

II. Caterpillar stage
  A. What caterpillars look like
  B. Reasons brought to U.S.
  C. How they grow
  D. How they spread during this stage
  E. What caterpillars eat
  F. How much they eat
  G. Damage to forests and shade trees
  H. Control measures during caterpillar stage
  I. Controversy about pesticides
III. Pupa stage
  A. What pupae look like
  B. Control measures during this stage
  C. Length of pupa stage
IV. Adult stage
  A. What adult moths look like
  B. Mating and laying eggs
  C. How moths spread during this stage
  D. Using synthetic sex lure as a control measure

I think we would all agree that a paper outlined in this manner would be fairly well-organized; indeed, papers organized in this manner are quite common in textbooks, encyclopedias, and the like. But we could not say that this is focused, for the reader does not know why the paper was written or why anyone should read it unless he already has an interest in reading about gypsy moths. In other words, this pattern is fine when the reader has already decided that he wants to know more about gypsy moths; in such a situation, the "surprise value" may be said to reside in the reader and not in the text. But for other situations, the reader is not automatically attracted to the topic and would find the paper a chore to read. It has no real surprise value to him because he does not understand the relevance of the topic to his own concerns.

The problem can be explained by the fact that there are two basic types of organizational patterns for informative papers--patterns based on the strategy of comprehensiveness such as the one outlined above;

and patterns based on surprise value. Yet our textbooks tend to cover only the former and students thus tend to produce comprehensiveness-oriented papers which are boring to read and lead to early brain death in teachers. They must also be boring for the student to write because the student must cover every subtopic, no matter how predictable or mundane, with the same degree of thoroughness.

In a focused paper, by contrast, the surprise value of the topic provides the reason for reading the paper and also guides both the organization and the thoroughness with which each subtopic must be covered. Subtopics with little surprise value can be omitted or condensed--the decision lying in the writer's judgment as to whether such subtopics might be needed as "background material" for some readers. This then allows the writer to spend most of his time and space on the subtopic with the most surprise value and to organize the paper to take advantage of the difference.

We can see how this would work in the case of the gypsy moth. The surprise value would vary depending upon where the article was published. For places where the moth was just becoming a pest, the sub-topic "methods of control" would be the most important--that is, most relevant to the here, the now, and the reader's needs and interests. But for a place that had felt the effects of gypsy moths for many years, "methods of control" would have little surprise value; something like "the controversy over pesticides" or "the success of synthetic sex attractants" would have to be the featured subtopic. Either way, the choice of the subtopic with the most surprise value for local conditions becomes the focus of the paper, and other subtopics are covered mainly to give a context for the feature.

The focus then carries over to the organization of the paper. For my own location, where gypsy moths are arriving but have not yet become pests, "damages caused by the moths" would be the best subtopic. I would want to be sure that this subtopic was prominently displayed, so the logical solution would be to put it first or last in the paper. That's what I have done in the outline below. The featured subtopic is last, and other subtopics are either highly condensed just to provide background material or just condensed enough so that the prominence of the main feature is evident. This pattern, employed most frequently in newspaper feature stories and in informative speeches, is called "pyramid of surprise," so I have drawn it in the shape of the pyramid (see Figure 1). The shape is intended to show graphically how much space is to be devoted to each subtopic.

Although this pattern can be more difficult to work out and follow than one of the comprehensiveness-oriented patterns, the advantages of it are clear. First, the writer need not devote an equal amount of effort to every subtopic. The requirement for comprehensiveness is met for the less-inspiring information if the writer gives only enough of such information to provide a context for the featured subtopics. Second, readers need not plow through reams of predictable information in order to find the "good stuff"; some predictable information is there for readers who need it, but it is highly condensed. Finally, since a reader is likely to remember only what he read last, the important information is last.

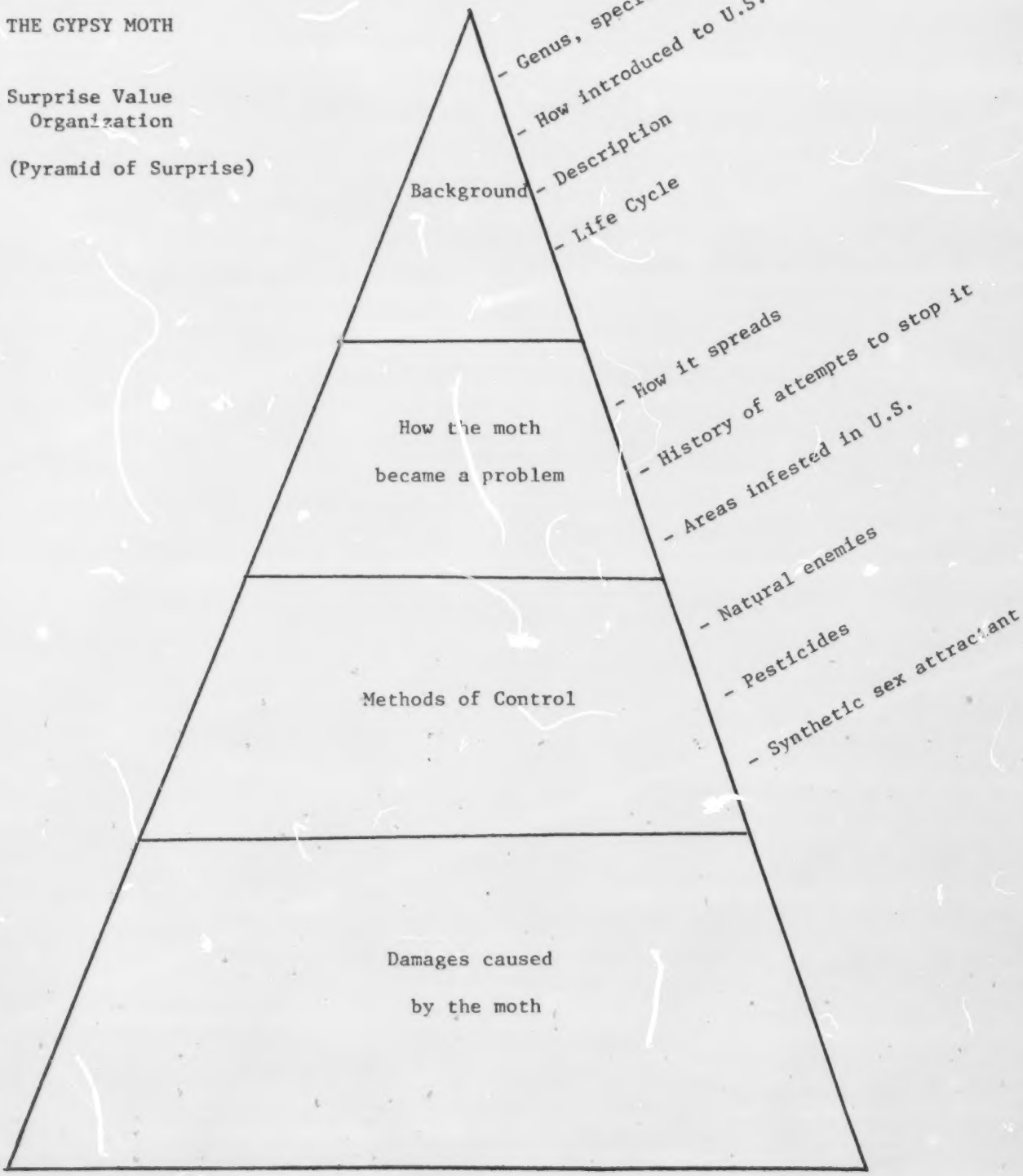
A final advantage of working with surprise value is that the surprise value, once located, helps sutdents with two other bugaboos that sometimes stump them--what to put in the introduction and conclusion.

Figure 1

THE GYPSY MOTH

Surprise Value
Organization

(Pyramid of Surprise)



I did not include an introduction or conclusion in either the chronological or pyramid of surprise outlines given earlier, but of course such items are necessary in the finished paper. The trouble with the chronological outline is that it gives the student no clue as to how to begin the paper, except maybe to "begin at the beginning" of the chronology--hardly a foolproof method for attracting readers. But the student who knows that his "real topic" is "methods of control" or "damages caused by the moths" has an immediate clue to how to begin. Images of helicopters swooping over the countryside spraying pesticide or gypsy moth caterpillars stripping a forest bare in July will make dramatic, eye-catching introductions. (I provide students with a list of ten introductory techniques culled from journalism textbooks.) The conclusion, then, is used to re-emphasize the importance or relevance of the main subtopic--suggesting that readers be on the watch for the first signs of an infestation or that they assess their trees to choose the best method of control.

In these many ways, the principle of surprise value is a guide to all stages of the writing process for informative discourse. How much more fruitful it is than the only advice given by most textbooks--that students should "narrow their topics." Yes, topics should be narrowed, but in what direction and for what reason? Surprise value is the guide.